

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities

THESES OF THE DISSERTATION

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Past Tense Use in Middle Hungarian
An Investigation on the Functions of Past Tenses
in Middle Hungarian

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The topic and aim of the dissertation

The dissertation examines the different past tenses and their functions in Hungarian based on sent letters (henceforth: letters) from the Middle Hungarian period. Since letters are a close representative of the style of spoken language, these texts are especially suitable for the analysis of spoken register and the study of language use related phenomena. During the Middle Hungarian period important changes took place not only in the rate of occurrence of the different past tense types but also in their discourse functions. No comprehensive work has been carried out and published to investigate this topic.

The aim of the dissertation is to give a comprehensive account of the different tendencies in the uses of past tenses in Middle Hungarian primarily through the exposition of the four past tense types and a detailed discussion of their functions in discourse. Special emphasis is laid on the three rarer types of past tense: the past tense with the suffix *-á/-é* (henceforth: *-á/-é* past tense type), the past tense with the suffix *-t* + auxiliaries *vala/volt* (henceforth: *-t + vala/volt* past tense type) and the one with zero suffix \emptyset + auxiliaries *vala/volt* (henceforth: \emptyset + *vala/volt* past tense type). These types are not used in contemporary colloquial Hungarian. Apart from these, the only past tense used in contemporary colloquial Hungarian (with suffix *-t*) is also discussed, furthermore a fifth type (suffix *-á/-é* + particles *vala/volt*) is also mentioned.

The present research aims to answer the following questions. What are the functions of the different past tense types? How are these functions manifest in the different sources? What are the similarities and differences of the letters of the period? What linguistic changes are these phenomena indicative of in the Middle Hungarian period?

The dissertation adopts the analytical framework used in **classical historical linguistic studies**. The function of the different past tense types and the change of these functions are discussed with no specific prior assumptions, and conclusions are made based on corpus evidence. However, as the analysis had shed light on new aspects of the matter of investigation, a novel analytical method was developed and employed to categorize and describe these functions. This method was not established at the onset of the research; it was developed during the process as new communicative functions were revealed. The method of analysis is based on **three main considerations**: i) how the given past tense type represents temporal structure, ii) the relation of past tense type and verbal semantic categories, and iii) the communicative function of the given past tense type based on the text structure representation.

The sources and methods of the dissertation

The **corpus** used in the dissertation comprises of collections of authentic letters written by the Noble during the Middle Hungarian period written in Hungarian, and published as faithful transcriptions. The great majority of the letters in the corpus had not been analyzed with respect to the use of different past tense types. The corpus does not contain letters written entirely in a foreign language, letters of unknown authors, texts that are not considered to be letters (e.g. wills and bills) and brief letters of one or two lines. Altogether 1224 letters were analyzed from the 175 years of the early and middle part of the Middle Hungarian period (from 1526 to 1700). Hence, the analysis of more than 12 000 verb forms was carried out with special attention to all relevant linguistic data.

The sources and their abbreviated names used in the dissertation are the following: Középkori leveleink 1541-ig (Letters from the Middle Ages until 1541 – KLev.), Batthyány Ferencné Svetkovics Katalin levelei (The Letters of Batthyány Ferencné Svetkovics Katalin – SLev.), Máriássy András levelei (Letters of Máriássy András – MLev.), A két vitéz nemesúr. Telegdy Pál és János levelezése a XVI. század végéről (The Two Noble Knights, The Letters of Telegdy Pál and János from the End of the 16th Century – TLev.), Literátor politikusok levelei (The Letters of Literary Politicians – LLev.), Lobkowitz Poppel Éva levelei (The Letters of Lobkowitz Poppel Éva – LPLev.) and Bethlen Miklós levelei (The Letters of Bethlen Miklós – BLev.).

The primary rationale for the use of an authentic corpus was the fact that these type of texts are especially suitable for morphological-historical analyses, since in the case of uncertain interpretations the researcher is not forced to take into consideration arbitrary analyses of past tense forms, but has the opportunity to evaluate and handle these cases separately, and also preserve their uncertain status. Only indicative past verb forms were considered, since tense marking varies only in these instances. Among these occurrences only those were analyzed whose category status regarding past tense type could be established.

Data collection was primarily carried out manually. The selection of texts based on the above outlined criteria was followed by the systematic collection of past tense verb forms and the functional analysis of the uses of these forms with respect to their context of occurrence. In order to carry out this analysis the sources were repeatedly and meticulously studied and compared. This process enabled the development of the aforementioned analytical method opening up new ways of the analysis of linguistic data and the description of functions.

The dissertation also outlines the limitations of the method which preclude systematic comparison in certain cases. The analyzed data exhibit an uneven distribution with respect to the dates in which the letters were written, their regional-dialectal classification (in some cases even the classification itself is uncertain) and formality. For this reason the importance of concentrating on apparently similar phenomena in the different sources (NÉMETH 2008: 26) is emphasized.

The analysis and description of the functions of past tense types from the Middle Hungarian period requires a complex research attitude which integrally employs analytic and synthetic methods. Namely, it is important to equally concentrate on the individual verb forms found in the corpus and also on greater tendencies in order to accurately describe the subject matter at hand and draw relevant conclusions.

The outline of the dissertation

The introduction outlines the topic and aims of the dissertation and also summarizes the significance of research on past tense based on „written spoken language” (PUSZTAI 1999). Subsequently, a detailed summary is provided on the publications on the history of the function of Hungarian past tenses in different periods with special emphasis on research carried out in the second half of the twentieth century and the past two decades. Also, special emphasis is laid on those results in the literature that are most relevant from the perspective of the analysis of our corpus (see e.g. J. SOLTÉSZ 1957; BÁRCZI 1963; KÁLMÁN 1975; E. ABAFFY 1991, 1992; NÉMETH 2001; SÁROSI 2003; É. KISS 2005; SZENTGYÖRGYI 2014; HEGEDŰS 2016). The inconsistencies found in the literature are highlighted and some unresolved questions are also mentioned. In relation to these, the influence of Latin is discussed both with respect to the history of past tense forms and to their functions. Furthermore, terminological inconsistencies regarding the past tense present in the literature are also discussed. Finally, it is established that the past tense types are termed based on formal characteristics in the present dissertation, and thus the terms *past continuous*, *past perfect* etc. potentially giving rise to confusion regarding their function are avoided (Chapter 2).

Subsequently, the corpus is presented (Chapter 3). The genre of letters, as a prominent genre of the Middle Hungarian period, is discussed in detail with a focus on the practice of correspondence and the historical aspects of language use and orthography especially with respect to the question of linguistic norm (Chapter 4) are also presented. The

next chapter discusses the relationships between verb, tense and aspect taking into consideration the semantic characteristics of the verb, the external and internal temporal structure of the sentence and the past tense form itself (Chapter 5).

The next part (Chapter 6) is the main chapter concentrating on the central aims of the dissertation, namely, on the analysis of the functions of past tense types in Middle Hungarian based on the aforementioned three considerations. The communicative functional aspects of temporal structure representation, the verbal semantic category and discourse structure representation are discussed separately for each past tense type. Provided there is sufficient information, the diachronic variations in the function of past tenses within the given period are also discussed. Afterwards, those functions are presented which are not specifically related to the individual past tense types but which are born out of the change in different tenses. The topic at hand also implies the inevitable presentation of the relations between verbal modifiers and past tenses.

The disclosure and categorization of the phenomena set out the goal of analyzing the functions of past tenses in Middle Hungarian by adopting a novel analytical framework. This also made it possible to highlight the further potentials in the historical investigation of past tenses. For this reason, finally a detour is also made in an attempt to analyze one specific function of the past tense of *-á/-é* past tense type in a socio-pragmatic framework, and to analyze some Middle Hungarian past tense verb forms in a functional cognitive linguistic framework (Chapter 7).

Results

The **results** are outlined in Chapter 6 in which the occurrence rates of the different past tense types are presented, as well as the pattern of functions emerging through the application of the aforementioned analytic considerations.

In all sources, the *-t* past tense type accounts for the majority of past tense occurrences. Its lower occurrence rate (68.7%) was observed in KLev. containing the earliest letters from the period, while the highest occurrence rate was found in LPLev. (85.9%). The usage rate of the *-á/-é* type was highest in KLev. (18.2%) and BLev. (17.6%), while the lowest rate was observed in LPLev. (8.3%). A surprisingly high occurrence rate of the *-t + vala/volt* type was found in SLev. (10.0%) and in TLev. (9.2%). In MLev. and LLev. only 7.4% is accounted for by the *-t + vala/volt* type, while this type is unquestionably the least frequent in

texts from the 17th century. The $\emptyset + \textit{vala/volt}$ type is even less frequent. Considering the whole corpus the number of its occurrences is negligible; its ratio is 1-2% in the majority of source texts. This ratio is exceeded in KLev. (2.8%), however, in LPLev. the figure hardly reaches 1% due the scarce occurrence of this form (0.7%). The fifth type ($-\acute{a}/-\acute{e} + \textit{vala/volt}$) is only found in SLev. and TLev.; its number of occurrence is altogether 3.

Certain Old Hungarian functions are strongly present also in the 16th century and later. However, it is particularly typical of the Middle Hungarian period that the functions of the different past tense types are mixed and blurred resulting from the tendencies that the past tenses are used more casually and interchangeably. Parallel to these, the different past tense types also took on new discourse functions during the period. The analysis revealed that if a function is associated with a particular past tense type in the letters by a particular author, than that function associated with that particular past tense type also occurs in other letters in a greater proportion. Analogies were found even for the characteristically rare functions in several collections of letters. This is how the functions tendentiously present in the Middle Hungarian period emerge based on the analyzed corpus. However, it is important to emphasize that it is not possible to describe or formulate consistent tendencies in the use of past tense types in Middle Hungarian, therefore, the focus of the research was on cases where in spite of the seemingly casual use of the tenses they exhibited specific and analogical behavior.

Regarding the communicative functions of past tenses, the research revealed the following. As far as **temporal structural representation** is concerned, the function of the $-\acute{a}/-\acute{e}$ past tense type is to represent events that took place in the recent past. These events could take place seconds, hours or even a few days before the utterance was made. This function is ubiquitous in the letters from the 16th and 17th centuries regardless of regional dialectal differences. At the same time this type of past tense was not used to refer to events in the remote past.

Regarding the **semantic category of verbs**, clear thematic groups emerge in the analyzed letters: on the one hand, these are modal verbs expressing ability, necessity, such as *akar* (*wants to*), *tud* (*can*) and *kell, kelletik -\acute{a}/-\acute{e}* (*had to*). These uses are frequently associated with both references to the recent past, and also with the expression of personal implication which manifests itself most unambiguously through the expression of volition. The past tense type at hand is central in the case of semantic verbal categories prototypical with respect to acts of saying and movement, especially with the group of verbs expressing the movement of human walking. Instances of the $-\acute{a}/-\acute{e}$ past tense type in these two thematic groups were found in great

proportions in all of the textual sources, irrespective of the region or dialect of the source. Apparently, these alternate with the *-t* past tense type, however, exclusively in the *-á/-é* type in certain texts. On the other hand, verbs referring to events or actions of great importance and profound consequence constitute a clearly delineated group. Verbs belonging to this group can have positive and also negative emotional valence, and the events referred to by these verbs are associated with a deep emotional involvement. These instances often co-occur with emotional expressions. The *-á/-é* past tense type used with verbs belonging to this semantic group emphasizes the gravity of the situation and accentuates the personal implication of the language user. Furthermore, when positive or joyful events are referred to with the use of verbs in the *-á/-é* past tense type, these events are most prominently related to childbirth, physical healing, the retreat of plague, getting rid of the enemy or adverse weather changing for the better. Verbs of negative events and actions found in the corpus dominantly express death, deterioration of health or physical condition, illnesses, as well as theft, damage to property, treachery, defection, negligence, fraud, accident, loss of rank, natural disaster, adverse weather, arrival of unfavorable news, and a number of other verbs expressing infliction of damage or suffering from losses. A significant proportion of these events – whether they be positive or negative – take place unexpectedly. The *-á/-é* past tense type has a special role in emphasizing this aspect of the events, since it was found that the past tense type at hand can express unexpected occurrences without also expressing personal involvement with either positive or negative emotional valence. At the same time, the *-á/-é* past tense type can express emotions induced by turns of events, or emotional reactions to some happening. These functions are all present in the letters irrespective of dialect. Another representative group of verbs in the *-á/-é* past tense type refer to the circumstances of the exchange of letters. The semantic groups of past tense verbs share an important feature: proximity of the interlocutor, cognitive immediacy and personal implication. The significance of the past tense type at hand in expressing the state of being a witness taking grammatical evidentiality into account has been emphasized by Péter Pomozi (2014), and it has also been treated by Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy (2017) in a functional cognitive framework with relation to its role in the 19th century. The analysis of the corpus also revealed that the *-á/-é* past tense type has an important role in referring to events that were personally and directly experienced by the language user, whether these events be related to a change of fortune, falling ill or healing, birth or death etc., or verbs denoting saying, movement and exchange of letters.

With regards to the uses of the *-á/-é* past tense type pertaining to **text structure**, special attention was paid to its occurrences in narrative scripts in sequences. A special

characteristic of this usage is that these occurrences have a narrative role in referring to series of connected events. It is possible that this is the survival of a function typical in an earlier period in which the usage of the *-á/-é* past tense type dominated in narrative texts. This phenomenon, however is rare in the analyzed corpus. The effect of analogy is also possible: if the past tense type at hand is used in one particular instance, then another verb of the same form can follow it without any further independent motivation. It has been found that while this type of use is typical in KLev., TLev., LLev. in referring to grave, troubled events which are in connection with struggle, battle, accident, injury, in BLev. it is not used to express serious turn of events. Rather the past tense type is used narrations of eventful occasions and can express emotions (e.g. sorrow or fury) which may be related to the above outlined function of emotion expression. This phenomenon is not typical in SLev., MLev. and LPLev. Another identified function of the *-á/-é* past tense type is highlighting the change of topic which can occur together with the particle *továbbá* (*furthermore*) or without it: the change of topic implies the change of the past tense type used.

The primary function of the *-t + vala/volt* past tense type regarding the expression of **temporal structure** is denoting an event prior to a past time of reference (henceforth: anteriority). Instances of this use are found in great abundance both in complex and compound complex sentences throughout the regions of the sources. Occurrences with both *vala* and *volt* can express anteriority. This periphrastic form is used to express past and also present events. Another important function is the expression of the perfect aspect. The *-t + vala/volt* past tense type can emphasize perfectivity with verbs of inherently perfect meaning, however, its perfectivizing function independently of such verbs was also observed. Perfective aspect and anteriority can be expressed simultaneously. Forms both with *vala* and *volt* occur in perfective uses. Apart from expressing relative tense, it was observed that the past tense type at hand can denote events both in the recent and distant past. The exact time reference in these sentences is marked via time adverbs. When denoting recent past, the majority of verbs in the *-t + vala/volt* form refer to events or actions that took place one or a few days before the utterance was made, however, this type of past tense is not typically used to refer to events that occurred seconds, or hours prior to the utterance. A dual function of the past tense type was also observed: it can denote recent past together with anteriority. Forms with *vala* and *volt* can both denote events in the recent past. Instances of these referring to more distant past events is interestingly much less frequent. This past tense type is often used with the expressions *azelőtt, annak előtte* (*before that*), *ezelőtt, ennek előtte* (*before this*).

Regarding the **semantic properties of the verb**, three categories emerge in the use of the *-t + vala/volt* past tense type. These categories are present in all source texts. The most prominent of this category is the group of verbs expressing the circumstances of exchange of letters, and especially the circumstances of the writing of letters, such as *ír, megír* (*write*) with the *-á/-é* suffix. Furthermore, another distinct group is formed by verbs denoting the human movement of walking which are also prototypical to this group. The occurrence rate of these, however, is significantly lower than verbs of the same category in the *-á/-é* past tense type. The third thematic group comprises of verbs that denote negative, unfortunate turns of event such as falling ill, getting wounded, suffering defeat, attacking, treason and further annoying and regrettable happenings. However, the expression of emotions associated with these events is not typical of this past tense type. Furthermore, apart from some rare instances, the *-t + vala/volt* past tense type is not used with verbs of positive emotional valence.

Regarding the expression of **text structure**, it was observed that the use of this past tense type in a sequence of two or three verbs is also typical. This pattern may emerge due to analogy, or it is equally likely that the consistent use of the form emphasizes that the denoted events form a sequence of related events. This function is similar to that of the *-á/-é* past tense type in Old Hungarian. However, it is particularly interesting that use of the past tense type at hand in sequences is associated with everyday events and actions and is typical in the letters from the 16th century. The *-t + vala/volt* past tense type can indicate a change in discourse topic, similarly to the *-á/-é* past tense type, primarily also in the letters from the 16th century. This type of usage may co-occur with the particle *továbbá* (*furthermore*), or in other discourse roles indicating topic change.

The *Ø + vala/volt* past tense type has different roles in the expression of **temporal structure**. With respect to internal temporal structure, its most typical function is the denotation of progressive, ongoing events which can also appear as background events to short, completed actions. Additionally, it is used to denote past states and can express actions or events especially in the letter from the 16th century both with verbs with and without a verbal particle. Its variant with the auxiliaries *vala* and *volt* occurs with verbs denoting completed actions or states without a change in function. In some exceptional cases the past tense type at hand can denote short events when these events are unexpected, and can also denote repeated events and actions. Regarding external temporal structure, it can be used to express anteriority, posteriority and events in the recent past, albeit only sporadically. It can also denote present or future. Its variant with the auxiliary *vala* used to express conditionality in the present and past is also significant.

With regards to the **semantic categories of the verbs**, the uses of the $\emptyset + \textit{vala/volt}$ past tense type with the verbs of volition *akar* (*want*) and *kíván* (*wish*) and the verb of necessity *kell* (*has to/must*) were identified. This past tense type frequently occurred also with verbs of saying in the corpus.

Concerning the **text structure**, its use in a sequence of verbs may be associated with the expression of conditionality. The effect of analogy on the use of past tense is also possibly present, just as in the case of the *-á/-é* and the *-t + vala/volt* past tense types discussed above.

No specific functions were identified in the case of the *-t* past tense type. It is so ubiquitous (the occurrence rate is 70-80%), that it can essentially take any function in the letters.

The analysis carried out in the research has revealed that the novel analytical method using the three considerations is suitable for describing the subtleties of the different communicative functions of the past tenses showing also that the use of the different past tense types in the Middle Hungarian period was richly varied.

Furthermore, a novel result emerged through the functional analysis of the **variations in past tense use**. It has become clear that the variation of the different past tense uses with relation to each other can also have several functions within a given text. These functions include the expression of anteriority or posteriority, a change in person or number, and it can also be associated with a change in grammatical subject. Namely, it has been observed that a change in number, person or subject also implies a change in the used past tense type. Additionally, the variation can emphasize the different status of the main and subordinate clauses, i.e. the use of the particular past tense type can vary with respect to the relation of clauses within the sentence. Apart from these, the variation can emphasize clauses expressing some contradiction or it can refer to a difference in the particular layers of narrative structure (e.g. the contrast of current discontent with a state of past happiness). It can also express the delineation of the introductory clause to a sentence in direct speech from the direct speech part in that sentence. Finally, it was also observed that in certain instances the association among the same verbs or verbs of the same semantic category is expressed with the use of identical past tense types, thus such uses can express a contrast to other groups of verbs in the text.

As a detour, Chapter 7 discusses the further potentials inherent in two theoretical frameworks. Including also texts of witch trials, the specific function of the *-á/-é* past tense type

expressing events bringing about unexpected or abrupt changes, especially changes in bodily physical state, falling ill, mistreatment, death, curing or healing has been examined **in a historical sociopragmatic framework**. It is concluded that this function can be analyzed as a type of Searle's (2009) illocutionary act, namely, as an expressive speech act. Additionally, some of the identified functions of the past tense types were also revisited based on the analysis of the semantic structure of particular Middle Hungarian verb forms (cf. TOLCSVAI NAGY 2015) **in functional cognitive linguistic framework**. Based on this analysis, it was concluded that a more precise description of the temporal properties of the verb form (e.g. the completed aspect of events or unexpected turns) can be achieved if the temporal and event structure of the verb, and participants and figures of the denoted event is also analyzed.

At the end of the dissertation a number of further considerations are outlined which may open up new ways of analyzing past tense, and thus can reveal further subtleties of the already nuanced picture. The potentialities lying in the inclusion of further texts close to the spoken register into the analysis is also mentioned. Such texts could primarily be manorial court rolls and texts of witch trials whose extensive analysis would be unquestionably valuable. The analysis of these texts could provide a basis for comparisons pertaining to the phenomena identified in the letters. Another direction of research could reveal important tendencies regarding the function and change in function of past tenses by concentrating on a more extended time period (also outside the period of Middle Hungarian). Such an extended historical perspective could reveal the nature and potential cause of changes modelling processes which took place from the Middle Hungarian period until today.

The results of the dissertation can be used in a number of fields. Within historical linguistics, the results can have important implications for historical morphology, syntax and discourse analysis, especially regarding aspects of meaning. Furthermore, the results may be relevant also for pragmatic analyses. The results can provide basis for comparative work, too, in which the functions and tendencies of the Middle Hungarian past tenses can be correlated with similar tendencies in other languages. Also, the results can be utilized in secondary school grammar teaching, since it is well known that the interpretation of Hungarian past tense types of earlier ages poses a great difficulty for students.

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